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ABSTRACT

Scholars have addressed adults and the impact of popular culture on adult learning, but little attention has been directed toward the relationship between adult learning and African Americans. Most specifically, minimal information is related to adult learning that evolves as a result of popular culture influences. Popular culture promotes cultures of learning and teaches and facilitates a more informed literate citizenry. As a form of popular culture, movies inform adults about race, class, and gender issues. The movie, "Waiting to Exhale," challenges adult audiences to think critically about race, class, and gender experiences as they occur in the social context and examine problems that foster intergroup and community misunderstandings. It explores the complex themes of race, class, and gender and the quest for loving adult relationships amid the struggle to be successful African American women. African American women are given an opportunity to see themselves "in the picture" and to be viewed by others as their own vibrant, complex, and independent beings. The movie serves as a site that encourages audience identification and participation, critical thinking, and promotes adult learning for African American women. An analysis of movie reviews and a literature review has revealed that the movie stimulated adult learning among African American women and served to promote informal education and learning. (12 references) (YLB)

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Waiting to Exhale: African American Women and Adult Learning Through Movies

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Abstract: This paper proposes that movies are a great source for learning especially for African American women. Findings suggest that adult educators will want to look closely at how today's diverse adults are informed and make meaning via popular culture.

Introduction

There are many ways in which adults come to learn about the world around them. As adults we learn through socialization what our social, political, and moral script commands of us in society (Harris and Hill, 1998, p.1). This script which governs adult behavior is conveyed to us in many ways. The script both-invisible and visible permeates all aspects of society. We witness the script in the legal system. We witness the script in the political system. We witness the script embedded in our educational institutions as well as the workplace.

As adults we learn about our script, what we are, and what we think we ought to be through images brought to us via movies. These movies images allow us the opportunity to escape, to fantasize, to gaze, and to temporarily participate in the world of the "other" (hooks, 1996, p.2). Through movies we can call to question our individual and collective scripts in society. Movies allow us to look deep inside ourselves to question critical aspects of who we are and what our roles are suppose to be in this world we find ourselves in. Thus, through movies we question what our socialized roles are suppose to be and we even question our place in the collective.

Movies serve as vehicles where we can address our struggles, our triumphs, our joys, our pain, and our sorrow (s). Through movies then, we as adults learn a lot about who we think we are and who we think we might want to be. Movies provide a legitimate platform whereby we can reflect upon the reality and the responsibility associated with our prescribed roles and scripts. [M]ovies , as an entertainment medium, have been a potent "public information" system for more than 70 years. Thus, whether movies are reflecting or shaping they are contributing to the overall perspective we have of our society (Jowett and Linton, 1989, p.84). Moreover, movies serve not only as powerful socializing agents in society, but serve as vehicles where we can share and we can problem-solve. We can come together to discover new ways of being, doing, and, learning. Movies yield an opportunity to explore and examine adult learning in the social context. Such an examination affords adults an opportunity to investigate various cultures, traditions, values, and to assess cultural boundaries regarding diverse aspects of knowing and lived experience. We must acknowledge that movies play a vital role in the social construction of knowledge and learning about issues relating to difference, specifically those issues relating to race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity (Cortes, 1995, p. 169). Furthermore, we must acknowledge that "[w]hether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned (hooks, 1996, p.2).

This paper proposes that movies are a great source of learning especially for African American women. This is significant to the field because much of adult education embodies

research about adults which addresses learning in the formal context. Also, much of this learning pays attention to curricula models, learning styles, and the technical rationality which characterizes modern adult education. Although scholars (Brookfield, 1990; Brookfield, 1986; Graham, 1989; Carter and Howell, 1998; Merriam, 1979; Pomerantz and Benjamin, 2000; Armstrong, 2000; and Rowland, 1999) have addressed adults and the impact of popular culture on adult learning, minimal attention has been directed toward the relationship between adult learning and African Americans. Most specifically there exists minimal information related to adult learning which evolves as a result of popular culture influences. Hence, this paper will explore adult learning and popular culture effects as it relates to African American women.

Movies are outstanding reservoirs for learning, especially for African American women. This was evidenced by the movie, "Waiting to Exhale" an adaptation from Terry McMillan's best selling book in 1992 (Randolph, 1993). "Waiting to Exhale" made its debut in 1995, grossed 65 million dollars, and was nominated for several Grammys. The numbers are a testimony that this movie caused a stir among African American women. Such a stir translated into box office success for the movie and most importantly, stimulated African American adult learning through popular culture that had not been witnessed via contemporary film since the movie, "Color Purple" debued in 1985 (Holtzman, 2000, p. 238-239).

My exploration of African American women and adult learning through movies is based upon a review of the movie "Waiting to Exhale," an analysis of movie reviews which followed the film, and relevant literature that directly addressed popular culture and movies as a potential site for learning. My primary aim as an adult educator is to examine and discuss ways within which African American women learn through popular culture. In this discussion I will: 1)define and discuss popular culture and learning in the United States; 2)discuss movies and what they teach us); 3)provide a narrative overview of the movie "Waiting to Exhale;" 4)discuss African American women and adult learning which evolved as a result of this movie; and provide implications for adult education.

Popular Culture and Learning in the United States

When we think of popular culture, we typically think of those aspects associated with a people's culture. Popular culture refers to " commercially successful, mainstream, mass mediated cultural artifacts and personalities (Lull, 1995, P. 190)." Examples of mass mediated cultural artifacts include newspapers, novels and magazines, radio, television, and film/movies (Snow, 1983, P. 7). In the United States one finds that popular culture promotes cultures of learning. Through popular culture adults learn about the hegemonic nature of society and what their perceived roles should be. Adults learn about domestic issues, global affairs as well as matters relating to their community (Lull, 1995, P. 3, 21, 32 and Brookfield, 1990, P. 63). Also, popular culture encourages adults to learn about differences that exist among individuals, groups, and society (Brookfield, 1990, P. 63 and Brookfield, 1986, P. 151). In popular culture we find many deliberate and non-deliberate sites for critical thinking and learning that contribute to adults becoming more literate and knowledgeable about the world they live in. Popular culture then, also teaches and facilitates a more informed literate citizenry (Graham, 1989, P. 153, 159).

What Can Movies Teach Us?

By utilizing a variety of genres-movies entertain, educate adults informally and provide intentional and unintentional sites for learning (Jeffres, 1994, P. 328-330, Jowett and Linton, 1989, P. 118). As a medium of communication movies can also promote social and community

learning. Hamiltion (1992, P. 36-37) states that community and social learning which includes both-informal and formal transactions is obtained through experiential encounters, and efforts to adjust and accommodate societal phenomena. As a form of popular culture movies inform adults about race, class, and gender issues. "Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues (hooks, 1996, P. 3). As a multicultural educator movies educate for the good, the bad, and (when we think about the early development and history of movies)for the ugly. Movies "sometimes contributes to intergroup understanding through sensitive examinations of ethnic experiences, cultures, and problems, but at other times exacerbates intergroup misunderstandings through repeated presentations of derogatory stereotypes and overemphasis on negative themes about selected groups or nations (Cortez, 1995, P. 169)." The movie "Waiting to Exhale" challenged adult audiences to think critically about race, class, and gender experiences as they occur in the social context and to examine problems which foster intergroup and community misunderstandings.

Waiting to Exhale: The Movie

"Waiting to Exhale" (1995) directed by Forest Whitaker and based on the novel by Terry McMillan (1992) is a movie that explored the complex themes of race, class, and gender and the quest for loving adult relationships amidst the struggle to be successful African American women. In "Waiting to Exhale" African American women were afforded an opportunity to see themselves "in the picture" and to be viewed by others as their own vibrant, complex, and independent beings (Burks, 1996, P. 38). The movie "Waiting to Exhale focuses upon the lives, friendships and the collective of four middle-class African American women-Bernadine (Angela Bassett), Gloria (Loretta Devine), Robin (Lela Rochon), and Savannah (Whitney Houston) who live in Phoenix, Arizona. Bernadine's husband leaves her, Gloria does not think about entering a personal relationship, but focuses her attention on her son and the management of her hair salon. And, then there's Robin who's very ambitious and successful in the world of work and unsuccessful with men. Savannah completes the movie's cast of major characters. Savannah is a young professional, who has recently moved to the city of Phoenix where she finds herself in a relationship with a married man, who's forever on the edge of leaving his wife (NY, 1996, P.80 and Ebert, 1995). Not only are these women in search of intimate meaningful relationships, they are "tired of being treated as disposable commodities by men who will tell them anything before sex and have nothing to say afterward (Ebert, 1995)." Each of these four main characters share with viewing audiences their determination, struggle, pain, and triumph of the human spirit, in their quest for a loving relationship.

In depicting each character's struggle-the movie offered spices of humor sprinkled with seriousness. Also, the movie serves as a site which encourages audience identification and participation, critical thinking, and thus, promotes adult learning for African American women. Terri McMillan author of the novel Waiting to Exhale (1992) and screenplay assistant to the movie states: "I just think that there has been a real strong identification with the sentiment that these women have (Ebony, 1993, P. 26)." It is my belief that "Waiting to Exhale" the movie, does not tell the truth about all aspects of women's lives (hooks, 1996, P. 53), but the movie does an effective job at the truth (s) that it does tell. These truths are embedded in the fact that "[b]lack women as a group have experiences in the United States that make their lives different from those of White women and Black men simply because they are simultaneously affected by gender and race issues (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1996, P. 142). It is these truths, which

serve to stimulate adult learning among African American women and it is these truths which translated the movie into a box office success. An analysis of movie reviews and literature reveal that the movie encouraged, promoted, and stimulated adult learning among African American women.

Exhaling and Inhaling: Adult Learning and African American Women

An analysis of movie reviews and literature review revealed that the movie "Waiting to Exhale" stimulated adult learning among African American women. The movie served as a site which promoted informal education and learning. Informal education and learning is consistent with incidental learning. It is the learning that is unplanned and occurs as a result of the process of adult participation in the "everydayness" of human experience (Merriam and Brockett, 1997, P. 14). In the context of everyday experience "Waiting to Exhale" the movie functioned as an informal learning site which assisted African American women in authorizing their own voices and experiences (Giroux and Simon, 1989, P. 238). With these voices and experiences, African American women began to dialogue about critical issues that were presented in the movie. Examples of such dialogue includes the following:

"I loved [the movie] because it's what I go through as a black woman trying to find a mate on a daily basis, said 25-year old Stephanie Burns of Atlanta (Samuels and Adler, 1996, P. 66).

"There it is in a nutshell: the personal and the political inextricably bound up together. As an educated black woman in my 30's I am realizing that I may never get married, and that's very painful, says Markita Cheeks, 34, a Los Angeles business woman. Who is there for me to marry? (Samuels and Adler, 1996, P. 68)".

"Racism has been really hard on the brothers, but its been hard on me, too, " says 24 year-old Lisa Jacobson, a Los Angeles accountant. "We're told from day one by our parents that black men have it hard so we're suppose to accept whatever they put out there. But how long does that have to go on? (Samuels and Adler, 1996, P. 68)."

"I believe that the timing of the movie was particularly troublesome to Black men because of its debut so soon after the Million Man March. It seemed like a dash of cold water on the faces of Black men so soon after they had dared to hope that their image had been uplifted for a nation so used to seeing Black men as negative (Chapman, Symposium, 1996, P. 118)."

"One wonders why in the film the only love that a Black man openly expresses is for a white woman (Guy-Sheftall, Symposium, Ebony, 1996. P. 122)."

We witness in the above dialogue that the movie "Waiting to Exhale" triggered critical thinking and conversation about the lived experiences and realities that African American women face in their struggle for loving relationships with men. Further, in this dialogue we witness a discussion of issues which consider and address race, class, gender, and community. Through dialogue we also witness that movies operate as a catalyst in promoting informal learning such that African American women offered and provided "insights into various aspects of the human condition (Merriam and Brockett, 1997, P. 272)."

Documented literature and movie reviews support the fact that the movie promoted informal education and learning among African American women. One finds that African American women have a history of participation in informal education (Rogers, 1997, P. 147). Cynthia Neverdon Morton (190, P. 164) notes that "to promote mass education, Black women formed clubs, founded institutions, became teachers, and created innovative informal education programs of many types. [M]uch teaching and learning took place outside formal educational

settings." Following the movie debue of "Waiting to Exhale" African American women engaged themselves in informal education and learning activities. In response to the movie, African American women developed professional and personal book clubs geared primarily toward African American women and their development. Moreover, in these book clubs, African American women were encouraged, as they have done in the past to learn collectively and to identify issues of primary concern. These book clubs also encouraged conversations which were once labeled taboo among many African Americans, to emerge in a new way. In otherwords, the movies made it chic or rather "cosmopolitan" to engage in, and to have public conversation about private matters. According to Kerka (1996, P. 81) women's book club history can be traced to Athens, Greece and Rome, Italy. She also notes that book clubs foster principles consistent with adult education which include serving as: a safe environment for learners; learning is promoted as an interactive/social activity; personal experience is viewed as a legitimate source of knowledge; critical reflection is incorporated, and lifelong learning is promoted. An example of one such book club is Sisters 'N Books Book Club located in Cleveland, Ohio. Sisters 'N Books was founded early 1996 shortly following the release of "Waiting to Exhale" the Movie. The books founding President Velma Philips (a Cleveland area Assistant Middle School Principal) explained (Personal Interview, February 22, 2001) that the club emerged as a result of the movie "Waiting to Exhale. Philips stated:

"There was this need for African American women to continue the dialogue which was initiated in the movie. We're talking here about African American women in the community, in the office or out of the office who needed to talk further in an informal, safe, non-threatening setting about issues that some may have not addressed until "Waiting to Exhale" came to the screen." There were those of us who needed a place where we could freely relate to one another's personal experience, where there were no grades no tests, and yet we had the freedom-the freedom to listen and to learn from one another, and to value where each of us had been in our lives."

Philips also noted that Sisters 'N Books do have a set of basic guidelines which include the following: 1)members by majority vote elect new members to the club; 2)the group is committed to reviewing general announcements, personal updates, and discussion of any business; 3)book discussion consists of a rotating facilitator who will facilitate a one hour group discussion, 4)the group selects books three months at a time; 5) at least one meeting must occur outside of the member's home; lateness beyond 20 minutes in excess of three meetings will be the basis for revoked membership; 6)snacks and wind-down always follow book discussions; and a comprehensive reading list as well as guidelines for discussion and tips on being a good discussion leader and listener are provided to all book club members.

Adult Learning, African American Women and the Movies: Implications for Adult Education

My investigation reveals that movies serve as intentional and unintentional sites for learning. I argue that adult educators must address the learning that is taking place in the front rows of movie theaters as well as in classrooms. Because time, convenience, community, and, fun appear to encourage the participation of today's adult in a learning activity we need to tune into the ways that popular culture promotes participation in adult learning activities and hence, adult learning. I also posit that the learning that's considered real, meaningful, and applicable to the lives of adults is the learning that is sometimes-accidental, incidental, and informal. Also, I believe that curricula models and learning style assessments have their place and serve their

function in formal settings; however as an adult educator in the 21st century I must acknowledge the diverse ways that adults learn outside of the classroom. Through popular culture and especially through movies adults are learning about the world around them individually, and with one another by posing inquiry, engaging in dialogue, thinking critically, and forming learning communities as evidenced by book clubs. My paper suggests that continual development of adult education theory and practice must respond to the ways within which movies serve as vital sites that promote adult learning among diverse adult learners and findings suggest that adult education theory will want to look closely at how adults of the 21st century make meaning about the world around them outside the formal setting.

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